Life’s Final Journey: The Oncology Nurse’s Role

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Despite advances in technology and science, many people diagnosed with cancer are likely to die from the disease. Because of the long-term relationships that oncology nurses develop with patients and their families during lengthy treatment periods, they are the most appropriate clinicians to provide care across the continuum and through the final journey. Care of patients in the final days of life requires a comprehensive knowledge of common syndromes, skillful assessment, and adept clinical management. Nurses cannot focus solely on the needs of patients; family members often are unaware of the dying process. Oncology nurses are uniquely qualified to provide education and support to families at the bedside.

Nursing Management of Signs and Symptoms in the Final Hours of Life

Symptoms common at the end of life include rattle, delirium, myoclonus, and seizures. In a study of 200 patients with cancer, noisy breathing or rattle, pain, and urinary dysfunction were the most frequent symptoms during the last 48 hours of life (Lichter & Hunt, 1990). Other studies have confirmed that pain, delirium, dyspnea, and other symptoms are common in the final days (Hall, Schroder, & Weaver, 2002; Morita, Tsunoda, Inoue, & Chihara, 1999; Ng & von Gunten, 1998; Potter, Hami, Bryan, & Quigley, 2003). Oncology nurses who can manage the symptoms improve quality of life for patients and facilitate positive memories for patients’ loved ones at the bedside.

Rattle

One of the most difficult symptoms for family members to observe during the final hours is what is referred to as “the death rattle,” or rattle. The term refers to the sound of saliva and other fluids that accumulate in the oropharynx and upper airways when individuals are too weak to clear their throats (Hall et al., 2002; Wildiers & Menten, 2002). Although the symptom is not painful for patients, its association with impending death often creates fear and anxiety for those at the bedside.

Some evidence exists that avoiding the tendency to overhydrate patients at the end of